

Urban Projects and Religious Architecture in Post-War Cagliari: the Sant'Elia Village and its Church (1951-1956)

ARTICLE

Architecture, Urban Planning, Reconstruction, Church, Society

/Abstract

The first residential area planned and built in Cagliari after the Second World War was in Sant'Elia (1951-1956), selected after debateable political choices as an area of refuge for the poorer classes of the city's population left homeless after the war. The neighbourhood is in the peripheral area known as Lazzaretto, where many displaced people had already found refuge during the war. Without basic services, the neighbourhood initially accommodated around 2,400 people. The physical and social centre of the Sant'Elia community was the parish church of the same name, one of the few services in the neighbourhood. The project started to be developed in 1956 by the architect Salvatore Rattu, responsible for the main local architectural projects before and after the Second World War. He acted on the suggestions put forward by Archbishop Paolo Botto, who was heavily committed to pastoral work involving the peripheral areas of the city. Despite its basic conformation, the church reflects the developing technical trends of national religious architecture and would become fundamental in the urban and social characterization of the neighbourhood.

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Introduction: Cagliari and Post-War Reconstruction

During the Second World War Cagliari was bombed several times between February and May 1943.¹ The military bombardments brought the city to its knees; the census of the destruction caused by these attacks was drawn up by the Technical Office of the Municipality of Cagliari in 1945 and summarizes the calamitous consequences.² Of the approximately 7000 buildings standing in the city before the war, 36% suffered major damage.³ Many monuments and public buildings became entirely unusable; several citizens died as a result of the bombs and many of those who were unable to leave the city before the war were forced into makeshift accommodation.⁴

At the end of 1943 the debate on reconstruction began, animated by points of view expressed in the pages of *L'Unione Sarda*, the island's main local newspaper.⁵ The different contrasting positions soon polarized into two approaches: on the one hand there were those who argued that all the houses destroyed in the old neighbourhoods should be rebuilt as soon as possible but maintaining the pre-war urban layout; on the other hand, others insisted on the need for expansion beyond the city's borders by building up new outlying areas, according to what had already been preliminarily outlined by the urban planning commission prior to the war.⁶

However, the pressure of events towards the end of the war and the subsequent government reorganization prevented any immediate intervention. The impetus to act, however, came from the Legislative Decree of March 1st, 1945, which required the adoption of urgent reconstruction plans for cities damaged by the war.⁷ In 1945 the City Council of Cagliari approved the Reconstruction Plan that had been drawn up by the Technical Office, and then definitively reapproved it following modifications in 1947.⁸

With no real radical vision for urban planning, the new plan fell back on the approach set out in the 1941 plan, which focused above all on reorganising, demolishing and straightening roads in the historical centre; therefore, it advo-

1 Manlio Brigaglia and Giuseppe Podda, eds., *Sardegna 1940-45. La guerra, le bombe, la libertà. I drammi e le speranze nel racconto di chi c'era* (Cagliari: Tema, 1994).

2 Historical Archive of the Municipality of Cagliari (hereinafter HAMC), Technical Office, Census of the destruction caused by war events, General Planimetry, scale 1:4000.

3 Gavino Santucciu, *La storia di Cagliari nel dopoguerra tra processi urbanistici e conflitti sociali* (Fiesole: Fondazione Michelucci Press, 2020), 20-22.

4 Massimo Rassu, *Cantine, Caverne, Bunkers, La protezione antiaerea a Cagliari durante la seconda guerra mondiale* (Cagliari: ARSOM, 1944); Alessandro Ragatzu, *La ricostruzione e riabilitazione sotto l'egida della Allied Control Commission, Region 6. La questione degli sfollati* (Soleminis: Alisea, 2014).

5 Franco Masala, *Architettura dall'Unità d'Italia alla fine del '900* (Nuoro: Ilisso, 2001), 240.

6 The city of Cagliari had finally managed to formulate a Master Plan in 1941, following the announcement of a public tender 1928, which was awarded only in 1931. The new urban planning law of 1942 and the bombings of 1943 blocked the process of implementing the plan, making it basically obsolete. See: Anna Maria Colavitti and Nicola Usai, *Cagliari* (Firenze: Alinea, 2007), 101-114.

7 Lieutenant Legislative Decree of 1 March 1945, n. 154. Rules for reconstruction plans for towns damaged by war. Published in the Official Journal no. 53 of 2 May 1945, in force since 3 May 1945.

8 The first resolution of the municipal council dates back to 29 October 1945 (n. 1612) and was implemented by the Prefect on 24 December of the same year. Subsequently modified on 10 December 1946, the plan was definitively approved on 31 July 1947. See HAMC, Cat. I, Cl. VII, Resolutions of the Municipal Council.

cated straight lines of expansion along the main axes of expansion of the pre-war city: to the east along Via Dante, Colle di Bonaria, San Benedetto and Monte Urpinu; to the west towards the regional road routes, with new areas for low-cost residential housing and various other commercial activities.⁹

However, the plan was basically disregarded and then applied piecemeal and without conviction. Not even the establishment of the Autonomous Region and the appointment of Cagliari as the Sardinian capital encouraged any rapid and comprehensive reconstruction.¹⁰ The work on the city was carried out amid discontent and insufficient economic resources characterised by poorly coordinated emergency episodes of reconstruction that resulted in what has been defined as “haphazard and makeshift architecture and urban planning”¹¹. However, some economic and planning efforts had a different tenor, especially those concentrated on the reconstruction of the city’s symbolic buildings that had suffered serious damaged in the war.¹²

Against this background of ambiguous political-urban planning, the further onerous problem emerged of how and where to house displaced residents as well as those who, after the war, had flocked to the city from the countryside. The housing issue thus became one of the main emergencies of Cagliari but at the same time provided potential opportunity for economic and social recovery for the city and for the entire region.¹³

In Sardinia, as in the rest of Italy, the construction of new residential neighbourhoods was chiefly encouraged by the so-called “Fanfani Plan”, named after the Minister of Labour, who in 1949 introduced a law called “Measures to increase worker employment by facilitating construction of homes for workers”¹⁴. The law aimed to encourage public residential housing throughout Italy and was implemented and coordinated by the National Insurance Institute (INA), so came to be known as the “INACASA plan”¹⁵. It is within this scenario that the first popular neighbourhoods of reconstruction arose in Cagliari too, setting in motion architectural and urban planning projects of considerable importance for the ongoing expansion of the city up to the present day.¹⁶

9 Masala, *Architettura dall'Unità d'Italia alla fine del '900*, 241-242; Colavitti and Usai, *Cagliari*, 111-112. See also: Alessandra Casu, Aldo Lino and Antonello Sanna, eds., *La città ricostruita. Le vicende urbanistiche in Sardegna nel secondo dopoguerra* (Cagliari: CUEC, 2002).

10 Gian Giacomo Ortu, *Cagliari tra passato e futuro* (Cagliari: CUEC, 2004), 16.

11 Cit. Vico Mossa, “La ricostruzione della città,” *L'Unione Sarda*, 28 ottobre 1945.

12 Bernadette Petti, *I restauri e le ricostruzioni nel secondo dopoguerra. Il caso di Cagliari a confronto con il panorama nazionale ed europeo* (Cagliari: La riflessione, 2012).

13 Santucci, *La storia di Cagliari nel dopoguerra tra processi urbanistici e conflitti sociali*, 27-29.

14 Law 28 February 1949, n. 43 published in the Official Gazette on 7 March 1949.

15 The two seven-year periods of activity of the INACASA plan (1949-1956 and 1956-1963) set in motion a complex mechanism, controlled centrally through a series of steps outwards towards periphery areas. The general coordination followed the process of officialising the work procedure up to its delivery to the user, with a rational division of tasks and the participation of other local authorities and national bodies (INCIS, INAIL, INPS). See: Omar Ottonelli, ed., *Il piano Fanfani INA-Casa: una risposta ancora attuale* (Firenze: Polistampa, 2013); Paola Di Biagi, ed., *La grande ricostruzione. Il Piano Ina-Casa e l'Italia degli anni '50* (Roma: Donzelli, 2001).

16 Casu, Lino and Sanna, *La città ricostruita. Le vicende urbanistiche in Sardegna nel secondo dopoguerra*.

Creation and development of the Sant'Elia village: a new neighbourhood of "basic housing"

The area of Sant'Elia was the first neighbourhood in Cagliari to see the building of public housing after the Second World War. The new housing complex was located on the slopes of the promontory of the same name, about 4 kilometres south of the Cagliari's historic centre, and near the marshy area of San Bartolomeo, close to the coastline.¹⁷ The area was associated with the historic production of the Royal salt mines, with the large prison dedicated to the forced labour in the salt pans themselves (the Wet Prison), as well as the site of interesting agricultural and land reclamations carried out both in the mid-nineteenth century and in the early twentieth century¹⁸ [Fig. 1].

The area chosen for the new neighbourhood was deliberately distant from the historic centre of the old town, in an area with poor infrastructure and characterized by the presence of a small fishing village and the old Lazzaretto hospital, which had housed a high number of displaced people during and after the war.¹⁹

Despite being situated in a desirable environmental context, the area had historically been a place of segregation but to the town's post-war political classes it seemed natural to choose it as a "refuge area" in which to confine the city's poorer working class population in order to be able to conserve the central areas to build housing on demand for the middle-upper classes.²⁰

It was a choice that reflected the more general growth of Cagliari immediately after the Second World War, where weak urban planning regulations reigned and a speculative global vision of planning was implemented, prioritising separation, segregation, and exclusion in their planning rationale. The first act of planning for the new residential nucleus dates back to the summer of 1950, when the city council of Cagliari decided to allocate 50 million lire of funds for the construction of "basic housing" for the homeless on the outskirts of the city.²¹

17 The area takes its name from the medieval cult of Sant'Elia to which a church on the promontory was dedicated, but which has now disappeared. The hill is today also called Sant'Ignazio, from the name of the fort built at the top in the Savoy era. See: Maria Adele Ibba, et al, "Indagini archeologiche sul capo Sant'Elia a Cagliari," *Quaderni. Rivista di Archeologia*, no. 28 (2017): 353-386.

18 For an accurate study of the area from a historical perspective and of the physical transformation of the territory in terms of changing landscapes, see: Marco Cadinu, "Architettura e tecnologia nelle saline di Cagliari nell'800 e nel '900," in *Il tesoro delle città*, V, (Roma: Kappa, 2007), 99-113; Marco Cadinu, "Cagliari, il recupero dell'area orientale. Storia del paesaggio agrario e archeologia industriale," in *Recupero urbano per la città del duemila. Ricerca ed Ambiente*, ed. Vito Biolchini and Roberto Paracchini (Cagliari: Demos, 1996), 56-64.

19 The Cagliari Lazzaretto was built in the seventeenth century, then renovated in the nineteenth century. It was initially a place for society's marginalised, near the coast to house people affected by infectious diseases and for the quarantine of goods, animals and travellers. During the Second World War it housed a large number of displaced people, becoming a chaotic space with precarious hygienic and health conditions. Subsequently abandoned, it was renovated at the end of the last century, then reopened to the public as a cultural centre. See: Giuseppe Doderio, *I lazzaretti. Epidemie e quarantena in Sardegna* (Cagliari: Aipsa, 2001). See also: www.comune.cagliari.it/portale/page/it/il_lazzaretto (last accessed November 2024).

20 The basic idea of the policy of the time was to «purge the central areas of a certain type of inhabitants, demolish the old housing and begin extensive urbanization programs». Quoted from Gian Mario Selis, *Produzione e consumo di sottoproletariato. Un ghetto urbano in Sardegna. Il Borgo S. Elia a Cagliari* (Cagliari: Edizioni della Torre, 1975), 34. See also: Maurizio Memoli and Raffaele Cattedra, "Un contre-lieu d'urbanité marginale. L'exemple du quartier de Sant'Elia (Cagliari)," in *Marges urbaines et néolibéralisme en Méditerranée*, ed. Nora Semmoud, Bénédicte Florin, Olivier Legros and Florence Troin (Tours: PUFR, 2014), 125-144.

21 Resolution no. 26 "Construction of basic residential houses with 50 million lire financed by the Regional Administration" of the City Council of Cagliari n. 7 of 10 July 1950 (HAMC, Cat. I, Cl. VII, Resolutions of the Municipal Council, Council from 14 March 1950 to 23 November 1954, 14-15).



The cost was sustained by the local regional government, thanks to provisions guaranteed by Regional Law no.12 of March 9th, 1950.

The new houses were to make it possible to provide shelter firstly to the displaced people who were temporarily housed at the 'Is Mirrionis' military barracks, so that these could then be used as an infectious disease division of the nearby "Santissima Trinità" Hospital.

On 29 August 1950, Cagliari's town council announced a «public tender for the construction of basic social housing» initially to be built in the 'Bingia Matta' area, on the northern outskirts of the city of Cagliari. The municipal technical office, which prepared the tender, indicated building "types" that the competitors in the competition would be obliged to use in the development and execution of the project, to be presented together with a project outline for carrying out the works. Two companies participated in the tender: A company run by Engineer Ferdinando Martelli of Pisa²² and the "Società Generale Immobiliare of Rome"²³. The Administration awarded the contract to the former, but then subsequently

22 The company of Ferdinando Martelli son of Giovanni, from Pisa, was very active in Sardinia after the Second World War, as can be seen from the electricity supplies granted to the company (see Enel Historical Archive Cagliari, Ex Compartimento Angelo Omodeo, Società Elettrica Sarda, Distribution and sale of electricity, Construction Company Martelli Engineer Ferdinando). The same company was awarded a contract in Sassari for the construction of a house for the employees of the Chamber of Commerce in the Prunizedda area in 1951 and another contract for the construction of a house for employees based on the architect's design. Antonio Simon of 1956 (Historical Archive of the Chamber of Commerce of Sassari, Cat. V, b. 238, fasc. 22 and b. 244, fasc. 42). Ferdinando Martelli was the owner together with his parents of some lots in the Cisanello business area in the city of Pisa, as shown in the expropriation plan for the Executive Intervention Plan of the 1980s (cfr. Archivio del Comune di Pisa, Luca Pasquinucci Architetto, Pisa, Piano Esecutivo di Intervento in Cisanello «Centro Direzionale», Stralcio A, 1982).

23 Società Generale Immobiliare was among the most important construction companies operating in Italy from the end of the nineteenth century and in the twentieth century. Initially established in Turin in 1862, it began working in Rome in 1880, becoming a protagonist in the construction of important projects thanks also to the control of Sogene, Società Generale per Lavori e Pubbliche Utilità. In the 1930s, controlled by the Special Administration of the Holy See, it began to expand further, and after the Second World War participated in the construction of the largest residential complexes in Rome and important architecture in Italy and around the world, including some designed by Luigi Moretti (the Esso and Società Generale Immobiliare buildings in EUR, the Stock Exchange Tower in Montreal and the Watergate complex in Washington) in addition to other notable works such as the Velasca Tower in Milan. See: Paolo Puzzoli, ed., *La Società generale immobiliare Sogene: Storia, archivio, testimonianze* (Roma: Palombi Editori, 2003).

Fig. 1

Aerial photograph of the city of Cagliari, 2019. Highlighted, Borgo Sant'Elia, at the foot of the hill of the same name (source: Autonomous Region of Sardinia, Sardegna 'Foto Aeree portal').



received a bid from the latter to have “48 real estate units” constructed by one of the companies under its control, Sogene. These were to be added to the 50 initially planned and implemented following a deferred payment agreement over three subsequent years. The offer was considered advantageous by the municipal administration, as on the one hand it meant obtaining approximately double the expected amount of housing, thus satisfying the applications received by the municipal council offices,²⁴ and at the same time organising payment in several instalments would provide the time needed to find new budget resources.²⁵

Having deemed the offer acceptable, the administration initially explored the possibility of building this new group of houses on land «located between the two municipal roads “is Maglias” and the “is Corralis”». However, the negotiations fell through and the decision was made to build all the new units – both those awarded to the Martelli company and those agreed with Sogene – in the suburb of Sant’Elia, which was already municipal property and partly urbanised.²⁶ This choice gave rise to the principle of defining the neighbourhood, later renamed Borgo Sant’Elia [Fig. 2].

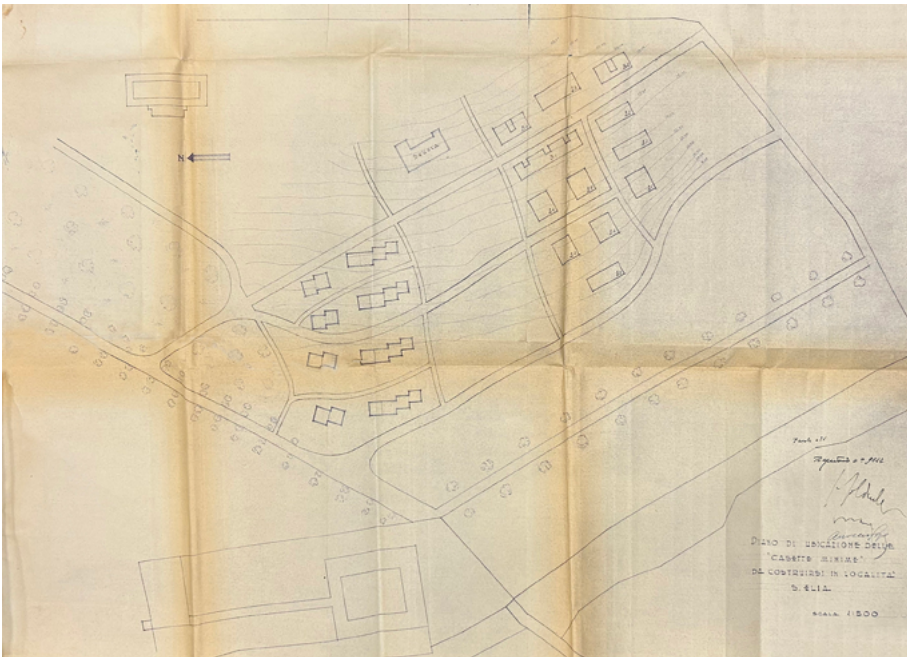
However, the continual changing of minds regarding location was indicative of the administration’s weakness and uncertainty and indeed reflected the absence of any general planning impetus that might have better guided urban planning choices. In fact, the reconstruction plan provided no real detailed planning valuable for directing the choices of layout and organisation of the new urban spaces; nor did it outline a basic supply of public services, something

24 This refers in particular to the recommendation advanced by Councillor Tola in the City Council meeting of 10 July 1950. See Resolution no. 26 “Construction of basic residential houses for 50 million financed by the Regional Administration” of the City Council of Cagliari n. 7 of 10 July 1950 (HAMC, Cat. I, Cl. VII, Resolutions of the Municipal Council, Council from 14 March 1950 to 23 November 1954, 14-15).

25 Resolution no. 49 “Construction of basic housing” of the City Council of Cagliari n. 7 of 18 December 1950 (HAMC, Cat. I, Cl. VII, Resolutions of the Municipal Council, Council from 14 March 1950 to 23 November 1954, 53).

26 Resolution no. 49 “Construction of basic housing” of the City Council of Cagliari n. 7 of 18 December 1950.

Fig. 2
Plan of Borgo Sant’Elia in Cagliari, 1956. The configuration, which can be deduced from the drawings attached to the contracts from the mid-1950s, shows the housing already built in 1956 and those still in the planning phase, including the church and parish structures (graphic by the author).



which would have significant repercussions in the history of the Sant'Elia neighbourhood.

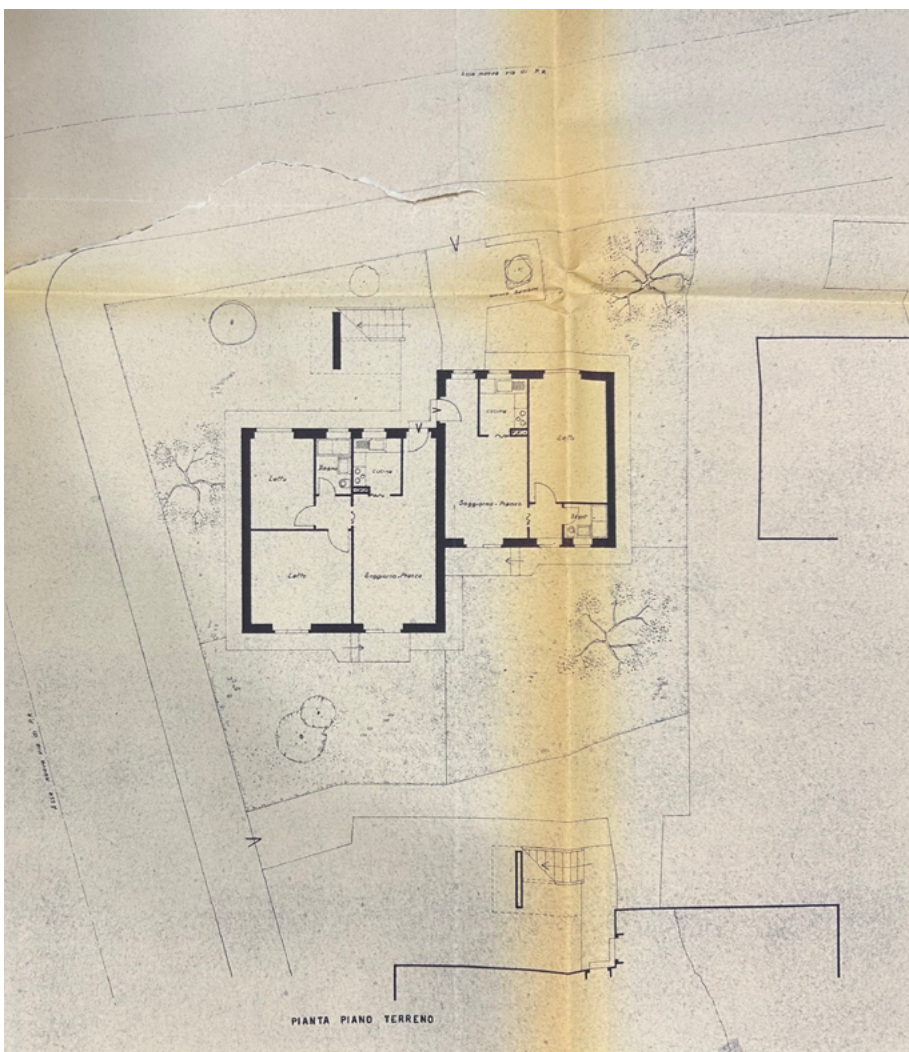
The contract with Impresa Martelli was stipulated on 17 March 1951,²⁷ while the contract negotiated with Società Generale Immobiliare di Roma dates to 16 April 1951.²⁸ The executive working drawings of the latter were created in November 1950 and were attached to the contract. They suggested restoring the original layout of the village of Sant'Elia, presumably following negotiations between the parties [Fig. 3]. The area identified for the urbanization is just east of the Lazzaretto, on the slopes of the Sant'Elia hill, in a slightly inclined area. The new graphic planimetric mapping system simply highlighted the new network of streets, the planned buildings, and the existing buildings, including the Lazzaretto. Three main road arteries outlined the layout for the road system, and approximately followed contour lines. These were interrupted by sinuous streets arranged grid-like to the former, thus creating large blocks. Further roads innervated the area with two separate building complexes, one to the north (that of the Sogene contract) and one to the south (the Martelli contract), separated by two large areas with no specific use decided but at the time probably intended as a possible site for services still to be finalised. The only service indicated was a school, which was never built, located higher above the complex.

From an architectural point of view, however, the two housing complexes differed somewhat in unit design, though were all contained within the two floors above ground, according to specifications that followed the criteria

Fig. 3
Location plan for the "basic public housing" to be built in the S. Elia area, tender for the construction of houses for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract No. 9532, Contract for the construction of 48 council houses in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzaretto. Sogene Company, Table 1).

27 Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 9462, Contract for the construction of two housing construction projects awarded to the 'Impresa Martelli Ing. Ferdinando' in the Sant'Elia suburb (ex Lazzaretto) (HAMC, Contract no. 1673, 17 March 1951). Added to this are two additional contracts stipulated in the following months: Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Procurement Contract. n. 9572 and no. 10494 (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1673, 17 March 1951). The signing of the new contracts had become necessary mainly due to the removal of the building fences and other minimal changes.

28 Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 9532, Construction contract for 48 minimum social housing units in the suburb of S. Elia (formerly Lazzaretto). Soc. Sogene (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951).



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Fig. 4
Ground floor plan of Type m+P, Contract for the construction of basic social housing for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract No. 9532, Construction contract for 48 social housing units in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzareto. Sogene Company, Table 6).

Fig. 5
East and west elevation of Type m+P, Contract tender for the construction of basic houses for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract No. 9532, Contract for the construction of 48 social housing units in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzareto. Sogene building company, Table 7).

established in the first of the four manuals published by INACASA, with the title Worker Employment Growth Plan. Homes for workers.²⁹

The proposed building typologies took advantage of the experiments carried out by the modern movement before the war and tended, in addition to architec-

29 INACASA published two dossiers in the first seven years of activity (1949-1956) and two in the second (1956-1963). The first dossier contained suggestions, rules and outlines for the development and presentation of projects. Building tenders (1949) specified the design of the housing, detailed according to four typologies of building: single or attached blocks of multi-storey houses, single-storey and two-storey terraced house. In the second dossier, "Suggestions, examples and rules for urban planning", blueprints for projects (1950) imagined the creation of whole neighbourhoods from a perspective of extensive urban planning. A third dossier, "Guide for the examination of INA-CASA construction projects" to be carried out in the second seven-year period (1956) was communicated as an update of the indications already published. The last dossier, "Regulations for the construction of the second seven-year period" extracted from resolutions of the Committee for the implementation of the Plan and the Board of Directors of the Ina-Casa management (1957), addressed the economic, financial, and procedural aspects of the plan for the implementation of building works.

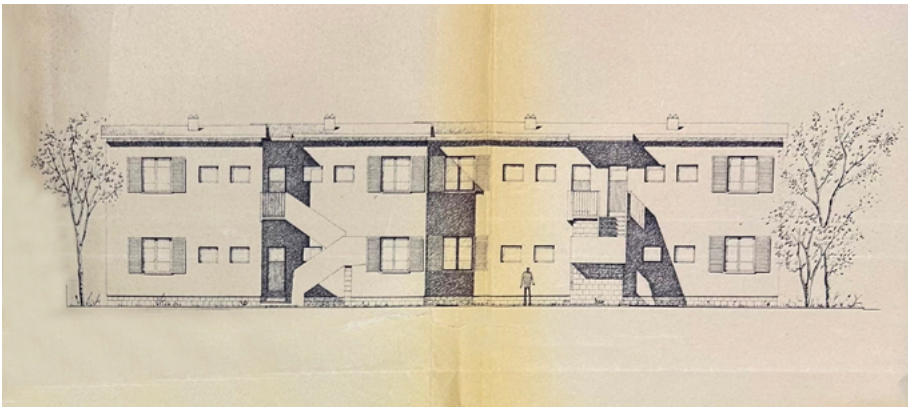
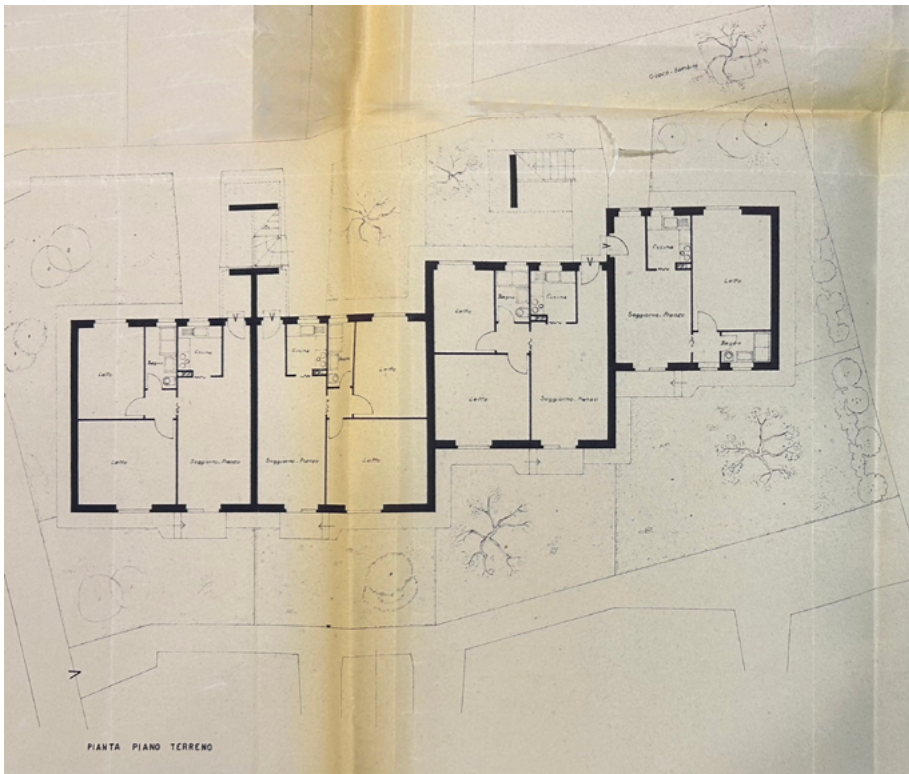


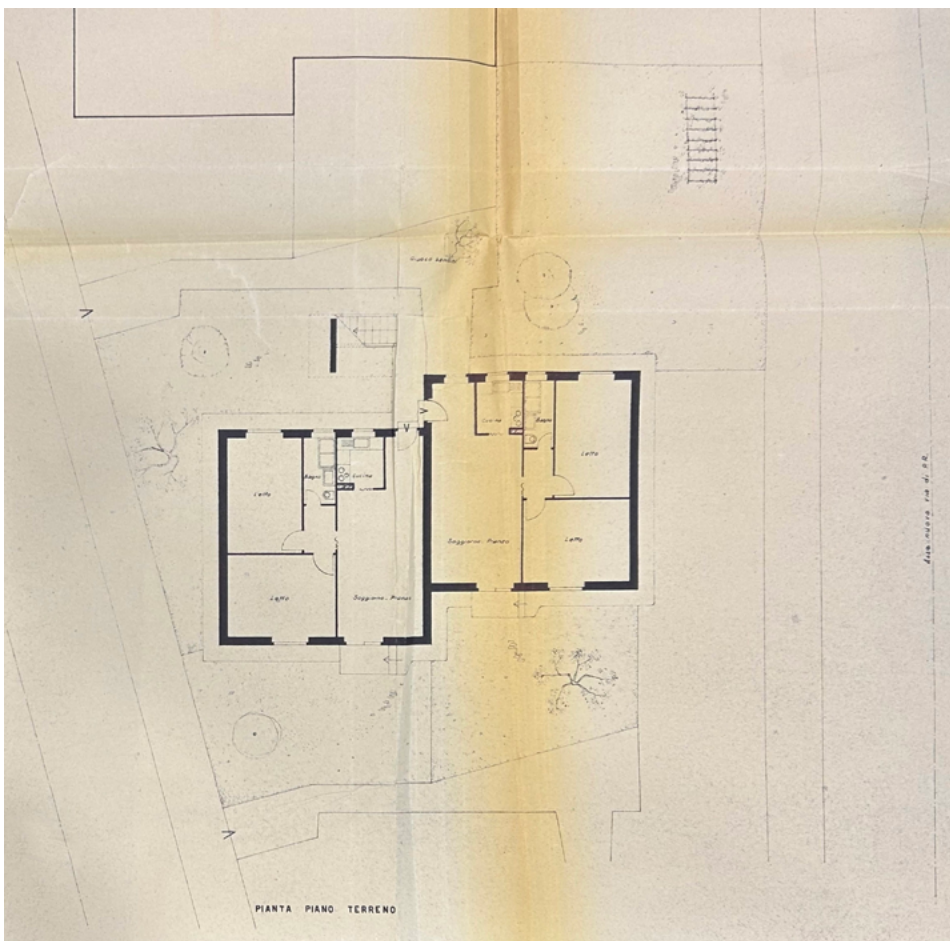
Fig. 6
Ground floor plan of Type M+M+m+P, Contract tender for the construction of basic houses for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract No. 9532, Contract for the construction of 48 basic council houses in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzareto. Sogene Company, Table 2).

Fig. 7
East elevation of Type M+M+m+P, Competition for the construction of basic houses for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract No. 9532, Contract for the construction of 48 social housing units in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzareto. Sogene Company, Table 3).

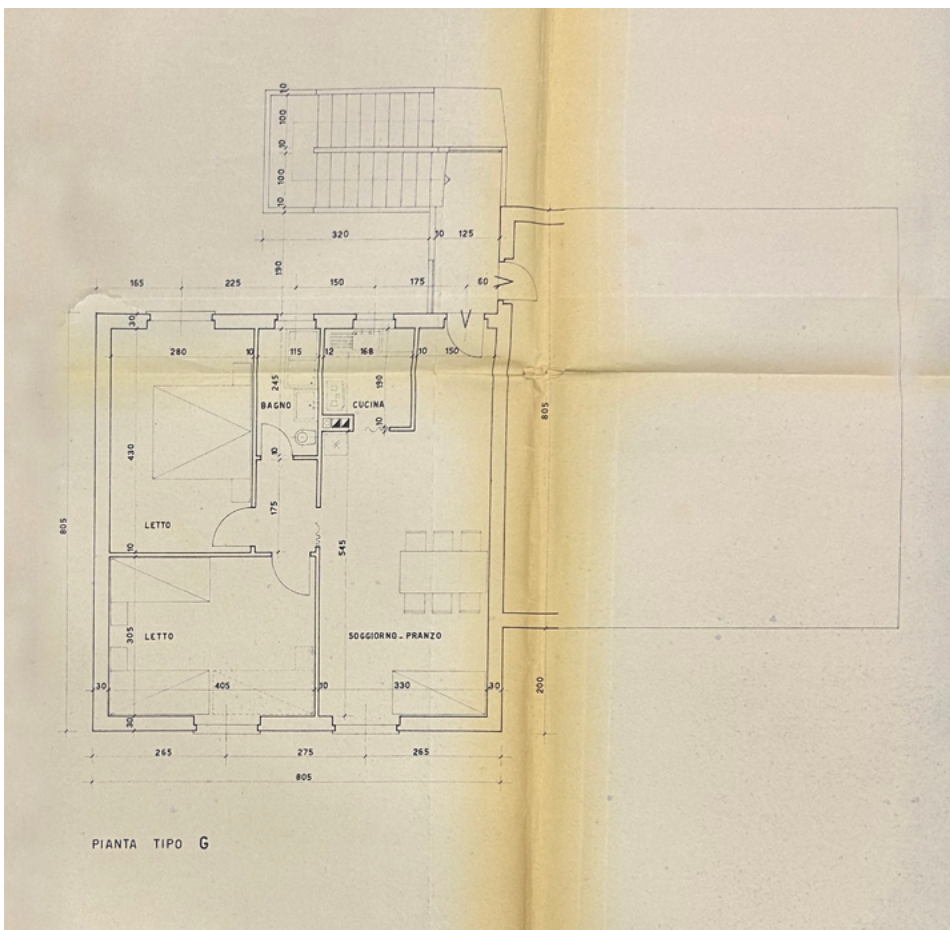
tural renewal and modernisation, towards standardization of building processes and the easy replication of the existing design typology. One of the reflections of this evolution can be found in the proposal for maintain essential building standards which, in Italy in the immediate post-war period, had as its first and most influential reference the Architect's Manual published by the CNR and USIS (1946).³⁰

The Martelli Company project included 5 types of houses on two floors: type A/1 and type A/2 with four apartments; the A/3 type with eight accommodation units; type B/1 with six accommodation units and type B/2 with four accommodation units, making a total of 12 buildings. All types had a pitched roof and were built in a reinforced concrete frame, brick and concrete floors, plastered brick walls and wooden window frames. The same construction characteristics were adopted in the project put forward by Sogene, characterized by a more refined, albeit simple work of recombining the typologies. The architectural plan was

³⁰ National research council, *Manuale dell'architetto* (Roma: USIS, 1946).



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Fig. 8
Ground floor plan of Type G+G, Contract tender for the construction of basic houses for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract No. 9532, Contract for the construction of 48 social housing units in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzareto. Sogene Company, Table 4).

Fig. 9
Detailed plan of Type G, Contract tender for the construction of basic houses for the homeless, Executive Project, Società Generale Immobiliare, 15 November 1950 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1676, 16 April 1951, Municipality of Cagliari, Contract of Rep. contract no. 9532, Contract for the construction of 48 council houses in the suburb of S. Elia – formerly Lazzareto. Sogene Company, Table 8).



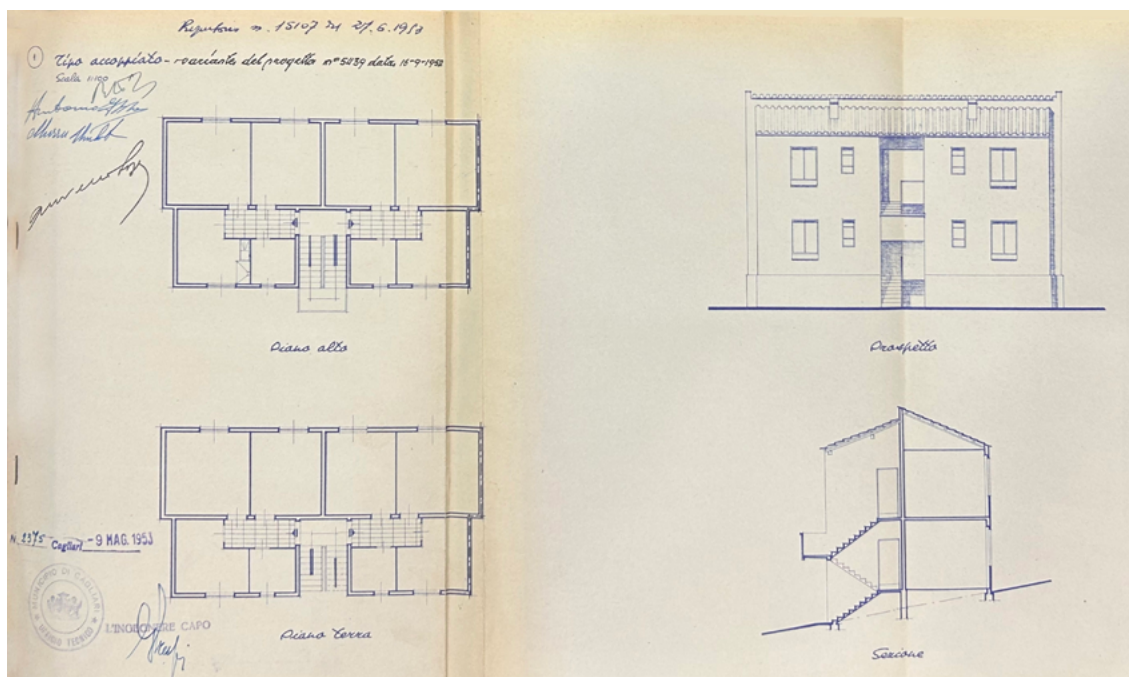
divided into three main combinations of accommodation units: m+P type [Fig. 4, 5], type M+M+m+P [Fig. 6, 7], and type G+G [Fig. 8, 9]. Each unit, identified by a letter, was designed on a square plan which rationalizes the internal space distribution to the maximum and features one or two bedrooms in addition to the living-dining room, the kitchen, and the bathroom. The accommodation units of the same size were stacked in pairs on top of each other and placed next to others along the perimeter wall with a slight planimetric staggering. The choice gives an interesting compositional variation which is reflected in the articulation of the elevations but essentially allows the respective entrances to the accommodation to be opened onto an external common space in the corner, helping to rationalize the service spaces.³¹

The new accommodation was intended primarily for displaced people who had been housed in the buildings to be demolished in Via Pessina, which was an area covered by the “Intervention Plan for Economical Social Housing” for the construction of accommodation to be used for employees of various public authorities operating in the city. The project for this area was carried out by Adalberto Libera between 1949 and 1952³² [Fig. 10]. While it had already drawn the attention of historiographers, the plan has been the subject of renewed interest in the light of the analysis of the Sant’Elia village conducted here. The several common characteristics between the two building projects have provided renewed interest in seeking further comparisons and fresh considerations. The first concerns the Società Generale Immobiliare of Rome, which together with

31 The documents of the executive project are contained in 10 tables attached to the contract plus an additional variation. See: Comune di Cagliari, Contratto di Appalto rep. n. 9532, *Appalto costruzione 48 case minime popolari sobborgo S. Elia (ex Lazzareto)*. Soc. Sogene (HAMC, Contratti, n. 1676, 16 aprile 1951).

32 Paolo Sanjust, *Modernismi. Storie di architetture e costruzioni del '900 in Sardegna* (Roma: Aracne, 2017), 163-176; Paolo Sanjust, “Il nucleo edilizio di via Pessina a Cagliari,” in *L’architettura INA Casa (1949-1963). Aspetti e problemi di conservazione e recupero*, ed. Rosalia Vittorini, Riccardo Capomolla and Sergio Poretti (Roma: Gangemi, 2004), 140-151.

Fig. 10
Panorama of Cagliari from via Pessina, in the foreground the accommodation of the IEEP project by Adalberto Libera, 1949-1952 (postcard).



INAIL, the Chamber of Commerce of Cagliari and the Società Elettrica Sarda formed the Economical Public Building Institute, promoter of the neighbourhood of the same name in via Pessina. This is interesting to note because it highlights the involvement of the Società Generale Immobiliare in both the Sant'Elia projects as well as those in via Pessina and confirms how at the time it was part of a broader geography of the company's Sardinian projects. The Società Generale Immobiliare was undoubtedly an able player in the technical panorama of the island's economy.³³ The second aspect concerns the architectural features of the building project. Adalberto Libera designed a garden city of 41 buildings with a total of 172 accommodation units and positioned the buildings at 45 degrees rotation compared to the road front, in order to achieve optimum solar thermal orientation, and to create a series of green spaces at the same time. A single building scheme, appropriately varied, generates a settlement divided into three types of buildings (type A, B and C), which appear as plastered prisms, pierced by large loggias and plastically composed in the urban space available.³⁴ Libera seems to have skilfully applied the dictates of the INACASA manuals and although the final outcome appeared airier than Sogene's project for Sant'Elia, it used the same original design matrices. Even the project developed by the Roman company's technicians succeeded in creating a continuous variation starting from an initial, elementary typology, building a formation of 8 units arranged in the lots planned on the northern front of the village. The simple manual application was anything but banal and found solutions for optimizing

Fig. 11
Plans and elevations of a duplex model, Variant to project no. 5439, 15 September 1952 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1757, 27 June 1953, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 15107, Construction works contract n. 13 buildings with 52 apartments in Borgo Sant'Elia, table attached).

³³ The Company also had a regional office in Cagliari and the works in Sardinia included the damming of the middle section of the Flumendosa river (1951) and the Alsar aluminum production complex (1968). See: Matteo Costantino, "L'opera della Sogene," in *La Società generale immobiliare Sogene: Storia, archivio, testimonianze*, ed. Paolo Puzzoli (Roma: Palombi Editori, 2003), 159-191 (particularly pages 163, 175, 181).

³⁴ Sanjust, "Il nucleo edilizio di via Pessina a Cagliari," 140-151.



Between 1952 and 1953, a new set of residential buildings was built further uphill from the first two residential complexes, in place of the initially planned neighbourhood school. The new buildings were laid out in rows using the A3 typology of the Martelli company's project and included 13 new blocks, 8 of which are joined together. The new complex developed the model of flat roofed residential blocks, also focusing on a more rational distribution of internal spaces inside the accommodation units, served by external stairwells.

In 1953, 13 new buildings were erected by the Ibba and Paulis construction company further north, along the main access road to the village from San Bartolomeo; there were a total of 52 new homes in all.³⁷ Two different models were suggested: the paired or semi-detached type [Fig. 11] and the detached type with lateral staircase [Fig. 12]. Both accommodate two mirror image accommodation units per floor, on two levels. The main difference between the two typologies of design was in the position of the stairs, laterally or centrally placed in relation to the complex, which in turn determined a difference in the layout of the internal rooms. The simple finishes and double-pitched roofs, similar to the first buildings in the neighbourhood built by the Martelli company, contributed to creating the small village atmosphere of the complex.

On the opposite side of the access road to the neighbourhood, further residences were laid out in parallel, 30 square-plan buildings with one and two floors, in addition to a series of 5 residential blocks, rigorously following building manual recommendations. Between 1954 and 1955, 12 new housing structures were built after two different contracts were awarded, respectively to

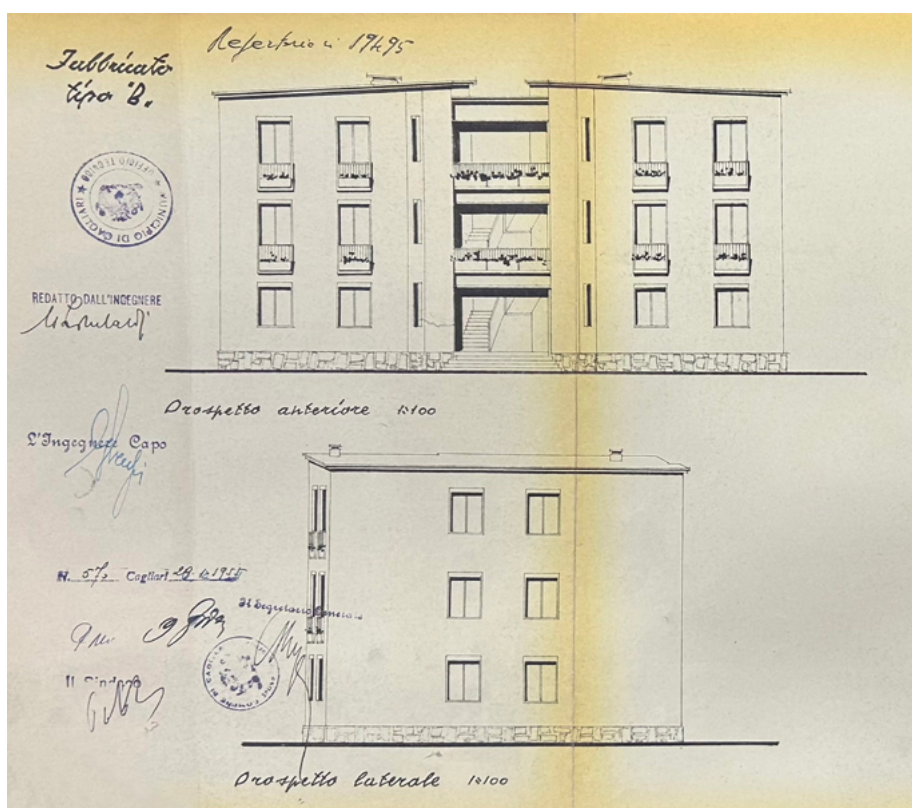
Fig. 13
Plan of Borgo S. Elia, Construction of 6 buildings, totalling 48 accommodation units in Borgo S. Elia, Engineer Lombardo, Municipality of Cagliari Technical Office, 22 May 1954 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1811, 15 July 1954, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 19353, Contract for the construction of 6 residential buildings in the village of S. Elia. Building company: Ibba Antonio and Paulis Beniamino, Table 1).

Impresa Picciau Cabras Mario (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1782, 9 February 1954); Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 16715, Construction work on the electrical systems in the 'Borgo S. Elia'. Manca Alessandro and Fantini Alfredo construction company (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1793, 10 May 1954).

³⁷ Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 15107, Construction works contract for 13 buildings with 52 accommodation units in the 'Borgo Sant'Elia' (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1757, 27 June 1953).



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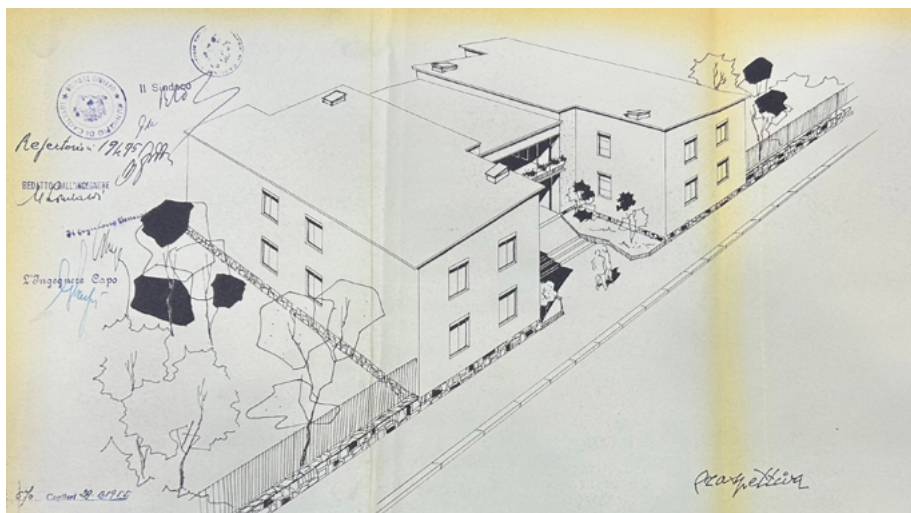
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Fig. 14
Elevations and sections
Building type A, Construction
of 6 buildings, totalling 48
accommodation units in Borgo
S. Elia, Engineer Lombardo,
Municipality of Cagliari
Technical Office, 28 December
1954 (source: Archivio
Storico Comune di Cagliari,
Contracts, n. 1848, 9 May
1955, Municipality of Cagliari,
Rep. Procurement Contract
n. 19455, Construction of 6
residential housing buildings
in Borgo S. Elia; Company:
Imprese Riunite Costruzioni).

Fig. 15
Elevations of building type B,
construction of 6 buildings,
totalling 48 accommodation
units in Borgo S. Elia, Engineer
Lombardo, Municipality of
Cagliari Technical Office, 28
December 1954 (source:
Archivio Storico Comune di
Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1848,
9 May 1955, Municipality of
Cagliari, Rep. Procurement
Contract n. 19455,
Construction of 6 residential
housing buildings in Borgo S.
Elia; Company: Imprese Riunite
Costruzioni).

the Ibba Paulis company and to the 'Imprese Riunte Costruzioni' company.³⁸ These are particularly noteworthy because they introduce a design variation to the complex and demarcate the final stage of the expansion of the village. The 12 buildings were divided into two groups of 6, respectively located to the north and south of the urban layout, according to a design plan that recommended incorporating the new buildings within the pre-agreed building area [Fig. 13]. The design created by the engineer Lombardi of the Technical Office of the Municipality of Cagliari, included variants A and B, on two and three floors respectively [Fig. 14, 15, 16]. The planimetric arrangement of the two typologies is the same, i.e. two mirror-image pairs of accommodation units per floor

38 Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 19353, Contract for construction of n. 6 residential buildings in the S. Elia village. Ibba Antonio and Paulis Beniamino constructions (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1811, 15 July 1954); Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 19455, Construction of n. 6 buildings for accommodation in Borgo S. Elia. Built by 'Imprese Riunite Costruzioni' (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1848, 9 May 1955).



connected by a trapezoidal distribution space. This design choice gave each building a “butterfly” shape, comparable to that suggested in the same period by Maurizio Sacripanti in the INACASA complex of Is Mirrionis, in Cagliari.³⁹ In this case too, the planimetric system has symmetrical wings, obtained from the interlocking of two rectangular buildings rotated at 15 degrees, connected by a central staircase which distributes access to 4 accommodation units per floor, over a total of 5 floors. Sacripanti’s project showed finer detail and complexity than that of Sant’Elia and, more generally, a different degree of compositional and architectural maturity. However, the almost contemporary research on the same typology once again shows how the design matrices proposed for the Sant’Elia village fell in line with recommendations in contemporary debate on the most suitable typology in designing “homes for all”.

Between 1956 and 1957 the village took on the shape and characteristics that it has broadly retained until today, plus various improvements made subsequently.⁴⁰ The accommodation units were completed and at the same time further infrastructure building was carried out on the complex in a meagre attempt to improve the provision of services.⁴¹ One important addition was the parish church and its adjacent properties, which would host the neighbourhood schools.⁴² The construction of the church became fundamental in creating a

39 Antonello Sanna, “Il nucleo edilizio Is Mirrionis a Cagliari (1953-56),” in *L’architettura INA-CASA 1949-1963. Aspetti e problemi di conservazione e recupero*, ed. Rosalia Vittorini, Riccardo Capomolla and Sergio Poretti (Roma: Gangemi, 2004), 164-173.

40 At the end of the 1950s there were 512 apartments, built thanks to a total financing of 475 million lire, contributed to largely by the Municipality of Cagliari and the Sardinian Region. 470 families (around 2400 people) were housed here; they belonged to the weakest sections of the population, not only of the city but of the province of Cagliari as a whole. See: Selis, *Produzione e consumo di sottoproletariato*, 22-23.

41 Among the works assigned in the years 1956-1957 were the waterproofing of the roofs of the houses, the construction of water pipes and the maintenance of the recently built nursery school. See Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Procurement Contract. n. 23516, Piecework contract for: waterproofing works on terraces of small houses in the suburb of S. Elia. Impresa Loi Salvatore (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1933, 22 November 1956); Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 26409, Contract for water pipeline works in the Bonaria, Poetto, Borgo S. Elia and S. Bartolomeo military areas. C.E.L.P.I. Soc. per Az. company – Rome (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1963, 7 May 1957); Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 27063, Piece rate act: Ordinary and emergency maintenance work on the Borgo Sant’Elia nursery school. Company: Becucci Antonio (HAMC, Contracts, n. 2019, 23 December 1957).

42 In the first decades of the neighbourhood’s life, roads, green spaces, and adequate connections with the city were lacking. A single tram line connected the neighbourhood with the historic centre, with an infrequent daily service. The only services present were the primary school and the middle school, housed in the parish premises, along with a nursery school. There were no pharmacies, and the only health facilities consisted of a municipal

Fig. 16
Perspective of a type A Building, Construction of 6 buildings, making a total of 48 accommodation units in ‘Borgo S. Elia’, Engineer Lombardo, Technical Office of the Municipality of Cagliari, 28 December 1954 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1848, 9 May 1955, Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 19455, Construction of 6 buildings for accommodation units in Borgo S. Elia; Company: Imprese Riunite Costruzioni).



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village image, which generally reflected renewed Italian urban planning landscapes of a neorealist nature [Fig. 17, 18, 19]. Despite the serious detailed planning and the continuous addition of haphazard building ideas with uncoordinated projects and contracts, the final visual aspect of the village proved to be very fitting to that “ideology of the village” much discussed in the vast landscape of the post-war reconstruction process in Italy.⁴³

health officer who attended daily and some doctors who had their own clinics that only operated for a few hours a day. See: Santucci, *La storia di Cagliari nel dopoguerra tra processi urbanistici e conflitti sociali*, 65.

43 The neorealist approach in Italian architecture of the 1950s aimed to build new working class neighbourhoods whose social environment would be akin to that of a traditional village. It adopted a “poor” approach to building, using materials found on site and a low-skilled but numerous workers. The trend was referred to as a utopia of the possible, but fell short of this ideal, often failing to create the environmental and social context to which it

Fig. 17
Cagliari, historical photo of Borgo Sant'Elia taken from the hill (private archive).

Fig. 18
Cagliari, Borgo Sant'Elia taken from the reclaimed area of San Bartolomeo (historical photo taken from the web-documentary “Sant'Elia. Fragment of a communal space”; project coordinated by Maurizio Memoli).

Fig. 19
Cagliari, Borgo Sant'Elia taken from the hill (historical photo taken from the web-documentary “Sant'Elia. Fragment of a communal space”; project coordinated by Maurizio Memoli)



The Sant'Elia Village Church

The construction of a parish church in the Sant'Elia village undoubtedly played an important role in the story of its foundation and development. As with many churches built in this period, its importance should be gauged in the context of various historical processes and events occurring at the time in both the local and international contexts: reconstruction, the economic boom, political conflict, the growth of cities and their suburbs, as well as church reform and renewal.⁴⁴

It was in 1953 that the City Council of Cagliari decided to grant the newly erected Parish of Sant'Elia municipal land for the construction of the village's parish church.⁴⁵ The sale of the area chosen was finalised at the beginning of 1954 and was located between the first two complexes built by the Martelli company and the Società Generale Immobiliare, in an area on a slope that was central to the neighbourhood⁴⁶ [Fig. 20]. In addition to this, another triangular-shaped lot of land near the Lazzaretto was granted in order to host new buildings for carrying out future parish activities. Assessment and surveying expertise for the transfer of the areas as well as the project of the new church

aspired. See: Elena Dellapiana and Guido Montanari, *Una storia dell'architettura contemporanea* (Milano: UTET, 2021), 390-395.

44 On the relationship between the Church and architectural movements in Italy in the decades following the Second World War, see: Andrea Longhi and Carlo Tosco, *Architettura, chiesa e società in Italia* (Roma: Studium, 2010); Andrea Longhi, *Storie di chiese storie di comunità. Progetti, cantieri, architetture* (Roma: Gangemi, 2017).

45 Resolution no. 67 "Transfer of municipal area for the construction of a parish in Borgo S. Elia" of the City Council of Cagliari n. 9 of 17 March 1953 (HAMC, Cat. I, Cl. VII, Resolutions of the Municipal Council, Council meeting held on 14 March 1950 to 23 November 1954, p. 241).

46 Municipality of Cagliari, Rep. Contract n. 20928, Free transfer of municipal area for the construction of a parish church in the 'Borgo S. Elia' (HAMC, Contracts, n. 1828, 27 January 1954).

Fig. 20
Plan of the free concession of the municipal areas for the construction of the church of Sant'Elia and the buildings attached to the parish, Salvatore Rattu, 1953 (source: Archivio Storico Comune di Cagliari, Contracts, n. 1828, 27 January 1954, Municipality of Cagliari, Procurement Contract rep. no. 20928, Free transfer of municipal area for the construction of a parish church in Borgo S. Elia).

was entrusted to Salvatore Rattu, a key figure in the city's architecture scene before and after the Second World War.⁴⁷

The construction of the parish and church of Sant'Elia is due in no small part to the direct interest of Monsignor Paolo Botto, elected archbishop of Cagliari in 1949. The ecclesial dynamics underlying the creation of the new parish of Sant'Elia are fully in line with the pastoral guidelines pursued by the archbishop, who was the protagonist of an intense effort that involved all the peripheral areas of the city during the 1950s.⁴⁸ His work was particularly characterized by the numerous foundations of parishes and churches, as well as the construction of the new diocesan seminary in the capital city.⁴⁹

From the reconstruction of the surrounding context to the construction of the church of Sant'Elia, which was not easy due to the lack of archival materials, the central role of Don Giuseppe Aramu, the first parish priest of Sant'Elia from 1952 to 1970, clearly emerges.⁵⁰ Don Aramu was directly involved in securing resources for the construction of the church and the center for parish activities. A first tranche of funding amounting to 40 millions lire was guaranteed by the State, which enabled the completion of the church's basic structure.⁵¹ Subsequent financial provisions were guaranteed until the end of the 1960s to complete the work, primarily from the Region of Sardinia and the Municipality of Cagliari. In 1961, the Region granted 14 millions lire, and the same year, 12 millions more were requested at the same body, along with 10 millions from the Municipality of Cagliari.⁵² Between 1962 and 1963, another 15 millions lire was provided by the Region and 4 millions by the Municipality of Cagliari, and a further 12 millions was allocated in 1964.⁵³

Don Aramu demonstrated great political agility in navigating the political landscape of the time to secure the necessary resources for the construction of the church. His familiarity with the political world was particularly evident in his interactions with members of the Christian Democracy party. Among his interlocutors were regional councilor Elodia Macis, regional councilors Giovanni De Rio and Salvatore Campus, and municipal councilor Antonio Follesa. He also

47 Salvatore Rattu (1899-1960) was an architect and university professor. Born in Cagliari in 1899, he studied at the 'Istituto Superiore delle Belle Arti' in Rome where he obtained the diploma of professor of Architectural Drawing which in 1929 enabled him to obtain the professional qualification to practice as an architect. Together with Ubaldo Badas he became the protagonist of the main projects in the city of Cagliari during the twenty-year period of fascism and after the Second World War, he contributed to the renewal of architectural styles in Sardinia. For an overview of the main projects, please refer to the sheets dedicated to his projects contained in Masala, *Architecture*, 142, 145-147, 192, 235, 243.

48 Following his appointment, Monsignor Botto was very active with his pastoral work that particularly involved the peripheral areas of the city. The archbishop dedicated much time and effort to the reconstruction and construction of new churches, in a period of general fervour for religious architecture in Sardinia. Piero Marras, *Chiese di Sardegna* (Sassari: Delfino, 2021), 269.

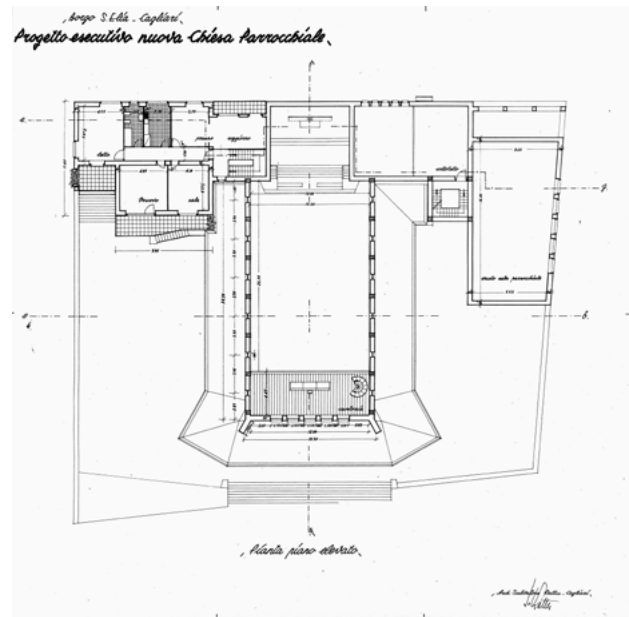
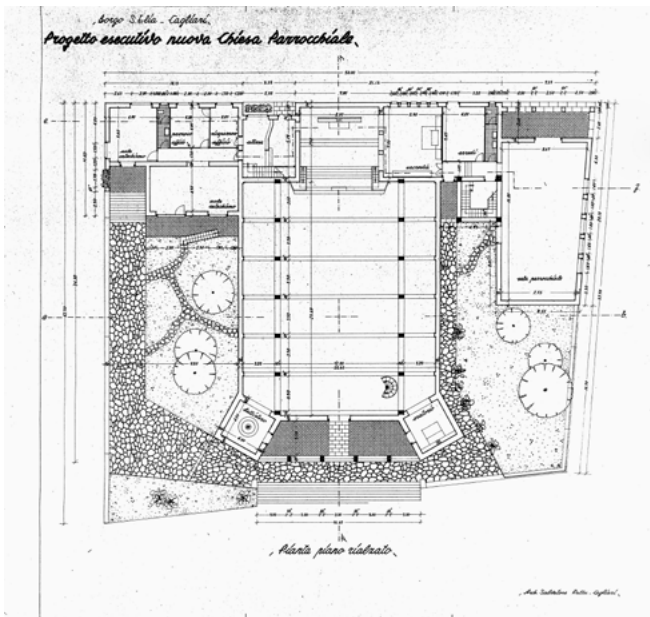
49 See: <https://www.seminarioarcivescoviledicagliari.it/storiadelseminario/> (last accessed November 2024).

50 The parish was founded by the archbishop in 1952 and was formally recognized with Decree No. 1094 of the President of the Italian Republic, published in the Official Gazette on November 23, 1955. Before the church was built, religious services were held at the chapel of the municipal kindergarten in the neighborhood. Archive of Sant'Elia Parish (hereinafter ASEP), Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 3, 9.

51 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 19.

52 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 35, 41.

53 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 42-44.



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established contacts with various technical experts from the municipal and regional offices, including engineer Salvatore Angius.⁵⁴ The priest's notable political connections are further evidenced by the constant presence of many authorities at the main annual celebrations at the parish of Sant'Elia, supported by his open alignment with the Christian Democracy party, which was the ruling party at the time.⁵⁵ A significant example of his direct involvement in the construction project was the interest shown by the regional councilor for Public Works, Salvatore Campus, who, during the final stages of the work along with the parish priest, expressed dissatisfaction with the result of the ceramics installation in the apse and requested its rearrangement.⁵⁶

As reported in the annual accounts of the parish, Don Aramu personally handled the architectural approval processes in Rome. He travelled to the capital to present the church project to the Pontifical Commission for Sacred Art in Rome in order to forward it to the Ministry of Public Works. On other occasions, he returned to Rome to request financial support from the State.⁵⁷

There are no documents detailing the interaction between the clergy and the architect to define the architectural and liturgical features of the new church. However, what emerges from the few available references is a general consensus among all parties on the proposed design, which does not seem to have undergone any substantial changes even during the construction phase. The choices, predominantly influenced by Don Aramu, seem to aim at compositional simplicity and the possibility of building a new church quickly and within a limited budget. This goal is also evident from the clear appreciation, both from

Fig. 21
Mezzanine floor plan, Executive project of the new parish church, Borgo Sant'Elia – Cagliari, 1956 (source: Salvatore Rattu Archive).

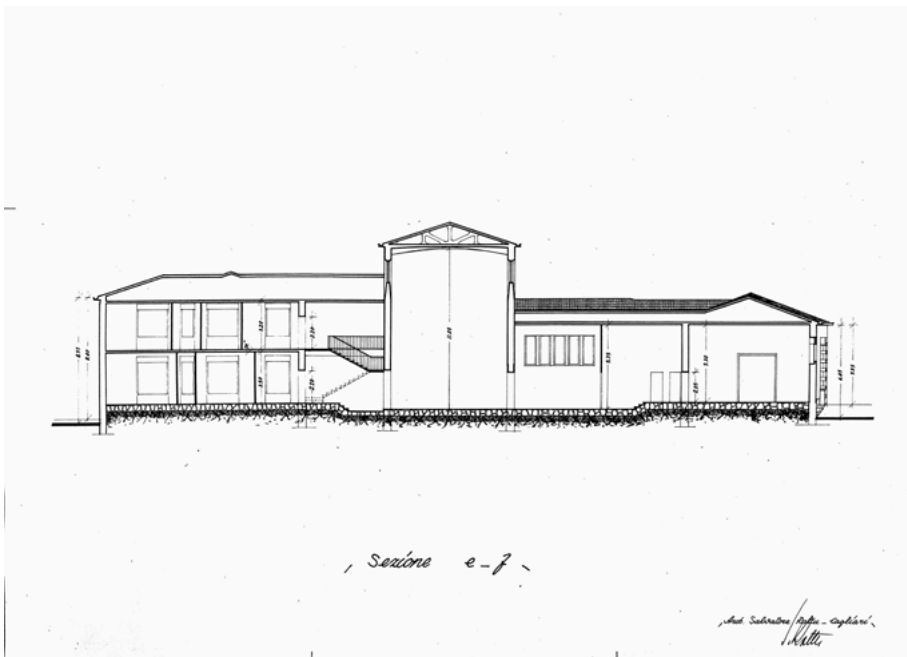
Fig. 22
High floor plan, executive project of the new parish church, Borgo Sant'Elia – Cagliari, Salvatore Rattu, 1956 (source: Salvatore Rattu Archive).

54 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 23. The engineer is recognized as a great benefactor of the parish. His passing, in 1963, is recorded as a "nota dolens" in the parish's life. Id., 43.

55 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 19.

56 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 50.

57 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 9, 19.



the parish priest and from the archbishop Mons. Botto, for the final result, which was described as “a temple so beautiful architecturally, a triumph of the Faith”⁵⁸.

The church has essentially minimalist but not uninteresting forms [Fig. 21, 22, 23]. It extends over a rectangular area of about 20 meters in length, with two rows of pillars that divide the central nave from the side aisles. The central nave is 12 meters wide and 11 meters high, while the side aisles are just over 3 meters wide and significantly lower than the nave. A short staircase with a trapezoidal narthex bearing four pillars - later partially blocked - marks the entrance to the space reserved for religious ceremony. Towards the interior and just beyond the narthex is a choir, reachable via a spiral staircase. On the two short sides of the entrance there are two square-plan rooms, the baptistery and oratory respectively. A large square apse measuring 8 meters on each side completes the structure and features a flight of steps which originally housed the altar at the top, which was subsequently subject to liturgical adaptation following the Second Vatican Council. The gabled roof, fashioned using a reinforced concrete structure, has an internal infill that simulates cross vaults and tensile structures, in the search for a questionable combination of tradition and innovation [Fig. 24]. More interesting is the exterior of the building which seems to faintly echo the stylistic features of early Christian basilicas [Fig. 25, 26]. In addition to the narthex and the gabled roof, the choice of a general sobriety evokes architectural solutions consistent with the first religious buildings of Christianity. The original option of exposed stone - now plastered - and the simple theory of openings in the main and lateral façade confirms the rationale for the choices made. The reference to traditional styles is reiterated by the square bell tower, culminating in a sequence of four long rectangular openings on each side and surmounted by a pyramidal roof. The bell tower is located on the right of the

Fig. 23 Section E-F, Executive project of the new parish church, Borgo Sant'Elia – Cagliari, 1956, Salvatore Rattu (source: Salvatore Rattu Archive).

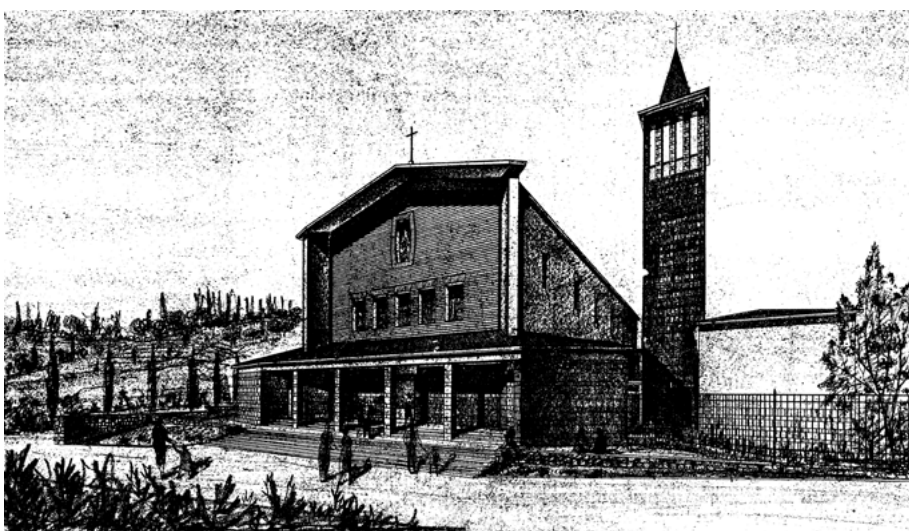
58 ASEF, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 52.



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Fig. 24
Perspective view of the interior,
Executive project of the new
parish church, Borgo Sant'Elia
– Cagliari, Salvatore Rattu,
1956 (source: Salvatore Rattu
Archive).

Fig. 25
Main elevation, Executive
project of the new parish
church, Borgo Sant'Elia
– Cagliari, Salvatore Rattu,
1956 (source: Salvatore Rattu
Archive).

Fig. 26
Perspective view of the exterior,
Executive project of the new
parish church, Borgo Sant'Elia
– Cagliari, Salvatore Rattu,
1956 (source: Salvatore Rattu
Archive)

main body, slightly separated from it and set against other service areas that surround the apse: among these the sacristy, a parish hall, classrooms for catechism and the parish priest's office [Fig. 27].

Amid the fervour that characterized religious architecture in Sardinia throughout the reconstruction period, the Church of Sant'Elia took inspiration from a model in widespread use, for example in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Nuoro (1951) and in the Church of Santa Lucia of Cagliari (1952 -1955).⁵⁹ Designed by the architect Adriano Cambellotti, the latter is particularly noteworthy for its design structures that elegantly imitate early Christian Roman religious architecture.⁶⁰ Most probably influenced by Cambellotti's model, Salvatore Rattu thought it expedient to revisit the design scheme used in both the church of Sant'Elia and in that of San Paolo in Cagliari (1955), which he had also designed.⁶¹ Given that it was a widely successful model, it was generally suggested as an alternative to the central plan model used in other contemporary religious buildings in the capital⁶² [Fig. 28, 29]. Regarding the artistic aspects of the church, particular interest is also given to the few decorations and furnishings, as well as the general liturgical arrangement of the church [Fig. 30]. The criteria for selecting these elements, within the context of the conscious sobriety of the architecture and the delicate social setting, seem primarily due to the dialogue between the parish priest, the designer, and the artists involved. The decoration of the apse with ceramic tiles is the work of Dino Francesco Fantini (1913-1981)⁶³ [Fig. 31]. Against a gray-blue background with white linear patterns alluding to sea waves, the scene of the Transfiguration of Christ is depicted, with Christ in the center, and Moses and Elijah on either side, in accordance with Christian iconographic tradition. The two figures are rendered realistically, but without particular virtuosity, using a range of blacks and grays. Christ stands out not only because of his central, elevated position but also for the chromatic treatment: his body and the surrounding aura are gilded, as well as some of the surrounding tiles on the wall, which seem to reflect the light emanating from the Transfigured body.



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59 The decade 1951-60 saw more churches were built in Sardinia than any other decade in the 20th century. 69 new religious buildings were built in the island in this period, encouraged by an increase in new parishes. Among these, that of Sant'Elia in Cagliari. See: Marras, *Chiese di Sardegna*, 269. In the capital, between 1945 and 1975, 17 new churches were rebuilt or built from scratch. See: Antioco Piseddu, *Le chiese di Cagliari* (Cagliari: Zonza, 2000).

60 Masala, *Architettura dall'Unità d'Italia alla fine del '900*, 252-253.

61 An album containing printed tables of Salvatore Rattu's project for the Church of San Paolo in Cagliari is contained in an archive held by the engineer Luciano Deplano (1926-2015) (University of Cagliari, Luciano Deplano Archive).

62 Among the centrally planned churches built in this period are Cristo Re (1952-63) by Giuliana Genta and Silvano Panzarasa and the church of SS. MM. Giorgio and Caterina dei Genovesi (1957-64) by Marco Piloni and Francesco Giachetti. See: Masala, *Architecture*, 253-254.

63 Piseddu, *Le chiese di Cagliari*, vol. 2, 88; ASEP, *Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari*, 25.

Fig. 27 Project model of the parish church of the Sant'Elia village created by the surveyor Roberto Cretara (Dipartimento Ingegneria Civile, Ambientale e Architettura, University of Cagliari).



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On the wall of the right nave, behind which lies the entrance to the sacristy, there is a large wooden statue of the patron saint, created by Vincenzo Demetz (1911-1990) from Ortisei. In the left nave, the Chapel of the Blessed Sacrament is located⁶⁴ [Fig. 31].

The fine wooden crucifix in the apse, which was not initially included in the design, is the work of Claudio Pulli (1892-1976) and was placed in the church in the 1980s. The piece was first presented in 1973 at the Biennale of Sardinian Craftsmanship and was later displayed in 1974 at the Exhibition of Sardinian Artists organized to raise funds for the restoration of the Church of San Giuliano in Selargius. The crucifix was then kept in the Church of San Giovanni Battista La Salle in Monserrato before being donated to the parish of Sant'Elia⁶⁵ [Fig. 31].

The cornerstone of the church was laid in 1957 during a ceremony attended by the main religious and political authorities, both regional and municipal. The church was built by several construction companies, which alternated due to the fluctuating availability of funds. Among these, the involvement of 'IBO Italia Soci Costruttori' is particularly interesting, as they were asked to send free labor for the construction site⁶⁶. The parish priest initiated the negotiations with the founder of the Italian branch, Don Angelo Marcandella, and with engineer

64 Piseddu, *Le chiese di Cagliari*, vol. 2, 88; ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 25.

65 ASEP, Brief Profile for the Analysis of the Artwork: Crucifix in Ceramic and Wood, Fondazione Claudio Pulli.

66 The IBO was a construction company founded in 1956 in Northern European Catholic circles and operated through voluntary and free work camps. The Italian branch was founded by Don Angelo Marcandella, instigating a rapid rise in overall building, with numerous active construction sites throughout Italy, mainly concerning the construction of churches and centres dedicated to pedagogy, leisure, and the education of the children of low-income families. There are records of the involvement of IBO Italia in the Borgo Sant'Elia projects from the personal archive of Don Antonino Orrù, a priest involved between the 1950s and 1960s in the construction of a summer residence in Solanas (southern Sardinia) promoted by the diocese of Cagliari. For the construction of the latter, the participation of the IBO was granted thanks to the intervention of Don Angelo Marcandella, who in a letter to Orrù wrote: "[...] this presence of ours will help resurrect an old project that was presented to us in Cagliari (Borgo Sant'Elia)". Cit. Orrù Family Private Archive (Sinnai), Letter from Fr. Angelo Marcandella to Don Antonino Orrù, 20 February 1964.

Fig. 28
Cagliari, Sant'Elia square and church (photo by the author).

Fig. 29
Cagliari, main elevation of the Church of Sant'Elia (photo by the author).



Harmacher, who were hosted in Cagliari in 1959. An agreement was reached, but the result was disappointing: by 1960, the 14 volunteers were sent back because they were deemed unskilled labor and unsuitable for the specialized needs of the church construction site.⁶⁷

As a result, the work proceeded slowly. The parish center, with meeting rooms, a cinema, and other spaces for community activities, was inaugurated in 1961.⁶⁸ The church was finally opened for worship with a grand ceremony on June 29, 1968, the day it was consecrated by Mons. Paolo Botto.⁶⁹

The church quickly gained the prominence envisioned in the neighborhood's plans from the previous decades and this was confirmed by the visit of Pope Paul VI on April 24, 1970, during his visit to Cagliari for the sixth centenary of the Madonna di Bonaria. The event is commemorated by an inscription inside the church and remains deeply etched in the Christian memory of the city to this day.⁷⁰ The religious building in fact stands as the physical pivot and focal point of the village of the same name, as do other churches built in the same period in the new neighbourhoods of Cagliari, especially working-class areas⁷¹. The central position in the urban space and the innovative architectural designs compared to other buildings in the village mean that the church of Sant'Elia stands out in

67 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 22.

68 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 33.

69 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 51.

70 ASEP, Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari, 53.

71 For a summary of the examples of religious architecture in the new neighbourhoods of the city of Cagliari between 1945 and 1975, see the summary account published in: Andres Martínez-Medina, Vincenzo Bagnolo and Andrea Pirinu, "The church of Cristo Re in Cagliari, 1952-1963, G. Genta and S. Panzarasa: tradition and modernity in the architecture of the central sacred space," in *Digital Modernism Heritage Lexicon*, ed. Cristiana Bartolomei, Alfonso Ippolito, Simone Helena and Tanoue Vizioli (Cham: Springer, 2022): fig. 7.

Fig. 30 Cagliari, interior of the Church of Sant'Elia (photo by the author).

the general urban setting and strikingly delineates the skyline of this new part of the city [Fig. 18, 19]. The rather stereotypical configuration of the ecclesiastical building designed by Rattu further adds to the neorealist character of the village, which aspires to mimic the environment of a rural village rather than the ambience of a city or metropolitan area.

Finally, it should be remembered that the church also acts as the social hub of the village community, at least up to the present day; indeed, it has remained one of the few meeting spaces available, and following its consecration became inextricably associated with the social characteristics of the entire neighbourhood. The pastoral activities conducted by the parish priest and supported by the diocese have made churches the headquarters of the Catholic associations that were receptive to the demands of the Second Vatican Council but also continued to be involved in movements strongly advocating for social housing in the following decades.⁷²

The social relevance of the church and the parish spaces for community gathering physically embody the fundamental role the parish has played in the neighborhood since its founding in 1952, being the only social institution besides the schools. It is within the pastoral activities promoted by Don Aramu that all the main recreational, social, cultural, and even entrepreneurial activities of the neighborhood are concentrated, with the committed task of steering the residents away from the grip of crime. In addition to religious associations, the parish hosts the guilds of fishermen and laborers, a sports association with several football teams, and above all the Sant'Elia Society, which over time has managed to attract numerous men – who were initially more reluctant to engage with the parish community – and even run a grocery store.⁷³

Conclusion

The episode of the town's history retold here with unpublished archive materials, attempts to demonstrate what an important page it was in the develop-



31

Fig. 31

Cagliari, apse of the Church of Sant'Elia with the ceramic decoration by Dino Francesco Fantini and the crucifix by Claudio Pulli (photo by the author). Fig. X

72 Santucci, *La storia di Cagliari nel dopoguerra tra processi urbanistici e conflitti sociali*, 69-76.

73 ASEP, *Historical Book of the Parish of Sant'Elia in Cagliari*, 4-54.

ment of the city and its local architecture; it mirrored a more general trend at national level. While the area in question has generally been associated with its problematic social environment, its importance lies in the characteristics of interest and the dynamics connected to urban design and the evolution of the city with regard to religious architecture.⁷⁴

If we consider the disparity in resources, starting conditions and prospects compared to other contemporary projects – such as, for example, that of Adalberto Libera in Via Pessina – the urban planning result achieved in the Sant’Elia village can be considered largely positive, in contrast to some problematic social aspects.⁷⁵ Despite the absence of a general design and despite the lack of services, the complex defines a measured and balanced urban space, in sharp contrast to the subsequent development of the neighbourhood.⁷⁶

Despite the simplicity of the layout, the construction of the Sant’Elia village attracted the interests of large companies on the national and international scene. The initial two protagonists of the first building works, the Martelli company of Pisa and the more famous Società Generale Immobiliare of Rome, were followed by ‘IBO Italia Soci Costruttori’ based in Trento, which were involved in further projects in the neighbourhood at the beginning of the sixties. The fact that the IBO company had a connection with the ecclesiastical environment reiterates the importance of the Church in the dynamics of the neighbourhood; the concrete manifestation of this is the parish church designed by Rattu, which still maintains its features and centrality in the village community today. Although it was one of the last pieces of the urban complex to appear, the church of Sant’Elia rapidly became the cornerstone of the urban and social environment of the neighbourhood. The act of *plantatio ecclesiae* (church planting) took on a practical (religious but also urban and social) significance and value, as a factor that laid the foundations for the entire urban complex.⁷⁷

74 Regarding sociological studies on the neighbourhood, see Enrico Maria Piras, *Sant’Elia tra appartenenza e isolamento* (Cagliari: CUEC, 2001); Raffaele Cattedra and Maurizio Memoli, “Un contro-luogo di urbanità marginale. Il quartiere di Sant’Elia a Cagliari,” in *Un lungo viaggio nella geografia umana della Sardegna. Studi in onore di Antonio Loi*, ed. Marcello Tanca (Bologna: Patron, 2014), 159-173; ; Selis, *Produzione e consumo di sottoproletariato*.

75 See also the press articles of the time, particularly those published in the newspaper *L’Unione Sarda*, which were highly critical of certain social aspects of the neighbourhood.

76 Following the disagreements over housing and in compliance with law 167 of 1962, the following four complexes were built: the Favero (1979), Lame (1984-1988), Anelli (1984-2000) and Torri (1980-1999). These were gigantic accommodation structures which, on the one hand, responded to the housing demand of many needy families, on the other accentuated various critical social issues. See: Santucci, *La storia di Cagliari nel dopoguerra tra processi urbanistici e conflitti sociali*, 63-64.

77 The theme of the *plantatio ecclesiae* is particularly significant in the foundation cities and the new cities. See Pasquale Culotta, Giuliano Gresleri and Glauco Gresleri, *Città di fondazione e plantatio ecclesiae ecclesiae* (Bologna: Compositori, 2007).

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Archives

HAMC Historical Archive of the Municipality of Cagliari

ASEP Archive of Sant'Elia Parish (Cagliari)